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ABSTRACT

In general, students attending two-year colleges are nontraditional students; i.e., first-generation, studying part-time, employed while attending college, from lower socio-economic status (SES) levels, or having poor high school achievement records. Attrition rates for first-semester two-year college students have been estimated at over 67%, with attrition highest for nonwhite students and those with low SES. Two critical phases affect the retention of first-semester students: making the transition to college and making connections in college. The first phase can be especially difficult for those students who are the first in their families to attend college, as they must often deal with changing identities, being perceived as different, leaving old friends behind, breaking family codes of unity and loyalty, and living between two worlds. Further barriers to retention can be student related (e.g., low SES, poor academic preparation, or a lack of clear goals) or institution-related (e.g., a eurocentric curriculum, lack of faculty involvement with students, or a campus climate perceived as racist or indifferent). Efforts at restructuring community colleges to increase nontraditional student retention should keep culturally diverse learners at the center of restructuring; create conditions for optimal learning, focusing on collaborative learning and infusing the curriculum with multicultural perspectives; diversify faculty and staff; and designate transfer as a high institutional priority. (KP)

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FACILITATING RETENTION AND TRANSFER FOR FIRST GENERATION STUDENTS IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Presentation at New Mexico Institute

Rural Community College Initiative
Espanola, NM

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BACKGROUND

ø Nearly half (47%) of all minorities in higher education attend community colleges (Carter & Wilson, 1993).

ø From 1988 to 1992, students of color posted a 35.5 percent increase in two-year colleges, as opposed to a 28.7 percent increase in four-year institutions.

ø General student profile is nontraditional--first generation, part-time, employed while attending college, low SES backgrounds, poor to average high school achievement records.

SOUTHWESTERN STATES WITH LARGE MINORITY STUDENT ENROLLMENTS IN TWO-YEAR COLLEGES:

Arizona	70%
California	65%
Colorado	52%
New Mexico	48%
Texas	47%

1991 ENROLLMENTS
BY TYPE OF INSTITUTION AND RACE/ETHNICITY
(In Thousands)

Student Group	Four-Year		Two-Year		Total
	N	%	N	%	
White	6,791	(61.8)	4,199	(38.2)	10,990
African American	758	(56.7)	578	(43.3)	1,336
Hispanic	383	(44.2)	484	(55.8)	867
Asian American	381	(59.8)	256	(40.2)	637
American Indian	51	(44.7)	63	(55.3)	114
Non-resident Alien	343	(82.2)	74	(17.7)	417
Total Minority	1,573	(52.3)	1,381	(46.8)	2,954

Source: U.S. Department of Education, January, 1993

ATTRITION RATES

ø Attrition is highest during the critical first semester of college.

ø The estimated rate of freshman attrition in 1992 was 67.7 percent in two-year colleges and 53.3 percent in four-year institutions (Tinto, 1993).

ø Attrition is highest for nonwhite students, as well as those from low social class origins and those with modest academic aptitudes (Rendon & Nora, 1989; Astin, 1975; Olivas, 1979).

TRANSFER RATES

ø National transfer rate is 22 percent.

ø Statewide transfer rates range from 3-42 percent (Cohen, 1993).

ø Black and Hispanic students do have transfer aspirations:

--Estimates range from 40 to upwards of 75 percent (Rendon, et.al., 1988; Richardson & Bender, 1987)

RETENTION--TWO CRITICAL PHASES

PHASE I--Making the Transition to College

ø Nontraditional students who are the first in their family to attend college find the transition to college to be a disjuncture in their life trajectory. Traditional students consider college-going a normal, rational part of their life experience.

ø Students who break their family traditions deal with issues such as:

- o changing their identity
- o being perceived as different
- o leaving old friends behind
- o separating from their families
- o breaking family codes of unity and loyalty
- o living between two worlds

Sources: Rodriguez, 1992; Rendon, 1993; London, 1989; Weis, 1985; London & Zwerling, 1992; Terenzini & Others, 1994.

PHASE II--Making Connections in College

ø Academic integration (grades, attendance, contact with faculty and students) is important to student retention.

ø Social integration (participation in extracurricular activities, clubs and organizations) is equally important to student retention.

ø Astin's theory (1985) of student involvement--the more students invest physical and psychological energy to get involvement in the academic and social culture of the college, the greater the potential for student success.

ø Not all students can get involved easily. Examples:

o Students who have experienced unconfirming experiences before enrollment

o Students who are academically and psychologically unprepared for college

o Students who feel lost in a strange academic environment

o Students who lack a sense of direction--don't even know what questions to ask.

ø Merely offering opportunities for involvement will not work:

o Many nontraditional students lack the cultural and social capital needed to make full use of the academic and social learning community.

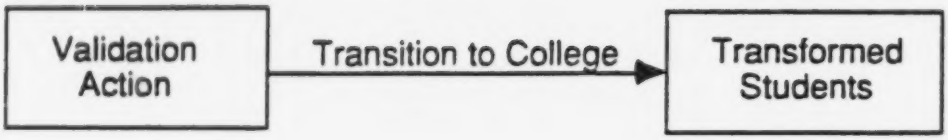
ø In- and out-of- class validation makes a difference for students who find it difficult to get involved (Rendon, 1994; Rendon & Jalomo, 1993).

ø Validation is an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and personal development.

Examples:

- o Calling students by name
- o Working one-on-one with students
- o Praising students
- o Encouragement, support
- o Allowing students to view themselves as capable of learning
- o Treating students with respect and dignity
- o Providing mechanisms by which students support and praise each other

The Impact of Validation



Transformational Changes:

- Believe "I can do it"
- Believe in inherent capacity to learn
- Become excited about learning
- Feel a part of the learning community
- Become motivated or driven
- Feel cared about as a person, not just as a student

RETENTION BARRIERS

STUDENT-RELATED BARRIERS

ø Low SES

ø Poor academic preparation (due in large part to tracking and attending poorly funded schools) creating:

--Under-developed cognitive skills
--Poor reading, writing, oratory and study skills
--Poorly developed test taking skills

ø Lack of clarity in defining academic goals, creating tentative commitment to educational goals

ø Psycho-social factors such as self doubt, low self esteem, fear of failure, fear about being perceived as "stupid" or "lazy," anxiety and cultural separation

ø Doubts about being "college material"

ø Trauma associated with making the transition to college

ø Unfamiliarity with higher education, resulting in being intimidated by the system

INSTITUTION-RELATED BARRIERS

ø Institutions not set up to educate or accommodate for diversity, creating an invalidating environment for students who do not "fit the mold."

--Majority of college faculty and administrators are white

--Curriculum tends to be Euro-centered

--Learning tends to be passive and fiercely competitive

--Faculty tend to be detached from students

--Students forced to conform to traditional teaching and learning models

--Some faculty hold belief systems that perpetuate negative stereotypes of minority students

--Theories that have guided the thinking about student development may not be appropriate for many minority students

--Campus climate often perceived as racist and/or indifferent to minority student needs and concerns

- Lax dropping in and dropping out policies
- Encouragement of part-time attendance
- Rising tuition and registration fees

TRANSFER BARRIERS

Institutional Barriers

ø Students sometimes channeled into vocational-technical and/or remedial tracks

--Remedial tracks resemble K-12 tracks

ø Transfer shock, i.e., a drop in GPA and anxiety created from having to learn and negotiate a new system

ø Poor relationships among high schools, community college and four-year institutions, creating an incoherent, fragmented system of education that becomes difficult to navigate

ø Poor counseling and advisement--crude method of making recommendations

o College costs

Cultural Barriers

--Hispanic families are sometimes apprehensive about a system they don't fully understand and do not encourage children to pursue higher education

--Hispanic students often are afraid of leaving home

--Hispanic and other first generation students often find they have to break family codes of loyalty and unity

Out-of-Class Barriers

--Students often come from barrios or neighborhoods where there are no role models, and no one to stress college

--Some told they could only go so far

--Out-of-class friends often pressure students to socialize with them and/or make fun of them for being not being in a "real college."

--Peers sometimes pressure students not to "act white" or break loyalty to peer group that may not be planning to attend college.

Sources: Rendon & Jalomo, 1993; Rendon & Valadez, 1992; Terenzini & Others, 1993; Rendon, Jalomo & Garcia, 1993; Rendon & Hope (In Press); Nora, 1993)

RESTRUCTURING COMMUNITY COLLEGES

1. Keep the culturally diverse learner at the center of restructuring.

--First generation status
--Ethnic/racial background
--Nontraditional background

2. Create conditions for optimal learning

--Strengthen the first year experience
--Focus on active, collaborative learning
--Infuse the curriculum with multicultural perspectives
--Actively engage students with faculty
--Set clear, high expectations
--Provide for faculty development related to understanding, appreciating and working with culturally diverse students

3. Diversify faculty and staff

4. Designate transfer as a high institutional priority

--Financial aid packages
--Common core curriculum
--Dual admissions
--Summer experiences on four-year campuses
--Clarify and strengthen articulation agreements
--Offer incentives for faculty to become involved with transfer education
--Set numerical goals for transfer
--Develop credit-bearing course "The Transfer Year Experience"
--Establish intersegmental board to provide leadership and coordination